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Making Empowering Choices: How Methodology Matters for Empowering Research Participants

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Abstract: In this article, I explore methodological approaches to the research process that can potentially empower research participants. I examine empowerment as it arises in the context of specific interactions between researcher and participant within the research process, as well as more broadly as it encompasses choices made by researchers about their broader methodological approach. I suggest that in both cases, choices about methodology are central to creating spaces for participant empowerment. Drawing on examples from a project conducted with former participants in a joint Jewish-Palestinian encounter initiative in Israel, I highlight the potential for *moments of empowerment* when methodological choices disrupt traditional power imbalances in the research dynamic, but also address the limitations of these moments that are inherent in most research endeavors.

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1. Introduction

The concept of empowerment has long been used as a substantive concept in numerous fields, including gender studies, education, applied linguistics, and international development, in order to address the potential of individuals from traditionally marginalized groups to reach their full potential and, more broadly, to examine initiatives aimed at changing the balance of power in society (STROMQUIST, 2006 [2003]). Within methodological literature, however, there has been less emphasis on "empowerment" as a concept, even as the field of qualitative research has seen vibrant conversation about both acknowledging and countering the tendency of research to position participants as vessels of information which the researcher, as expert, draws upon his or her scholarship. [1]

In this manuscript, I draw attention to "empowerment" as a methodological concept by exploring approaches to research that can potentially dismantle inequalities in researcher-participant relations, in particular participants who are also beneficiaries of interventions that are the focus of research. As such, empowerment as I discuss it here emphasizes the potential of research, via

choices made about methodological approach, to create spaces where participants have greater control over their substantive involvement in research endeavors as well as in terms of the researcher-participant relationship. I explore issues around empowerment as they arise in the context of specific interactions between researchers and participant, as well as more broadly through choices that are made about research design and methodological approach. My focus on these contexts draws attention to the distinction between what I refer to as *moments of empowerment*, particularly as they might occur in the context of a specific interaction between researcher and participant; and *empowering methodologies* that encompass both specific methods for data collection/analysis and the overall research design utilized in a scholarly project. Drawing on examples from a project conducted with former participants in joint Jewish-Palestinian encounter initiatives in Israel, I investigate what empowerment might mean, methodologically, in contexts outside of fully participatory projects, and I suggest that methodological choices at various moments across the research process hold potential for creating empowering dynamics within a given research context. I end by considering the complexity of empowerment as a concept in methodological scholarship and posing several suggestions for ways to broaden opportunities for empowerment, while acknowledging the challenges of producing authentic knowledge within the framework of traditional research. [2]

2. Exploring the Concept of Empowerment

The concept of empowerment has primarily been utilized in academic literature to describe substantive initiatives, specifically, initiatives that aim to "change the distribution of power, both in interpersonal relations and in institutions throughout society" (STROMQUIST, 2006 [2003], p.14). In its focus on the distribution of power, empowerment is closely linked to critical social theories, which, while taking many forms, share a focus on drawing attention to dimensions of power that are taken for granted and uncontested and on acknowledging interconnections between multiple forms of oppression (CARSPECKEN, 1996; KINCHELOE & McLAREN, 2011). As EWERT (1991) notes, these theories serve as frameworks both to understand the way power and oppression function and to seek out possibilities for emancipation from structural constraints, based on the assumption that existing structures are changeable through social action. The *critical* nature of these theories stems from their emphasis on transforming the hidden nature of power, as highlighted, for example, in FREIRE's (1970) concept of critical consciousness, i.e., individuals' development of awareness about social injustices that exist within and structures their lived worlds. Post-colonial scholars similarly focus on transformation of power, in particular in terms of hegemonic relationships between colonizers and colonized (e.g., BHABHA, 1994; SAID, 1978; SPIVAK, 1988). [3]

Within this framework, the concept of *empowerment* emerged in the field of international development, largely out of feminist critiques of development models —although as the concept became mainstream it "started losing its transformative edge" (SHAH, 2011, p.27), instead focusing on individual achievement rather than shifts in societal power (BATLIWALA, 2007;

CORNWALL & ANYIDOHO, 2010). In its broadest sense, however, empowerment as a substantive concept focuses upon combating injustice and oppression at multiple levels—structural, systemic, and individual, including through the development of critical consciousness and taking initiative based on that critical perspective to effect positive change, especially for/among marginalized groups (WOODALL, WARWICK-BOOTH & CROSS, 2012). CALL-CUMMINGS and HOOK's (2015) exploration of empowerment as it occurs within peace education initiatives in Peru and Jamaica, for example, examines the concept in terms of both individual and societal transformation, and in terms of both the development of critical consciousness and the demand for external, structural change. Likewise, ELLSWORTH's (1989) discussion of critical pedagogy in a university classroom points to the empowerment of individual students through curricular initiatives that provide them with the ability to see their broader social identities affirmed in what is taught/read/learned in the classroom setting. Both examples highlight, as part of the underlying concept of empowerment, the importance of creating opportunities for individuals and groups to disrupt the economic, political, and/or socio-cultural marginalization of non-dominant groups. In other words, the conceptualization of empowerment as utilized rests on an assumption of challenging traditional, taken for granted power relations. [4]

A conceptual foundation to empowerment that links individual with systemic and structural power shifts suggests that a critical approach to research should do the same. In particular, drawing on FOUCAULT's (1981) understanding of the relationship between knowledge and power, and the notion that knowledge production itself reflects power imbalances, there is a need for re-allocating power within and over the knowledge production process. Indeed, methodologists coming from a critical perspective support this, highlighting, for example, the importance of meaningful participation in shaping and guiding research about experiences of oppression by people who have experienced that oppression, and who are the experts of their own lived experiences. Thus, one major discussion in methodological literature focuses on how the research process may serve to provide participants with opportunities for reflection and for participating in the knowledge construction process, such as through explicitly participatory approaches, such as participatory action research (PAR) (CALL-CUMMINGS & MARTINEZ, 2016; see also FINE & TORRE, 2004). These participatory approaches to knowledge construction, almost by default, necessitate a shift away from reifying traditional researcher-participant hierarchies that allow researchers to demonstrate expertise about participants with little or no participant input. Related to this, a second approach to discussing empowerment within methodological contexts emphasizes disruption of researcher-participant power imbalances during specific moments in the research process. I discuss each of these in further detail below. [5]

The call for participatory research is one area in academic literature that touches on empowerment as a methodological concept. One such example is expressed by FOSTER-FISHMAN, NOWELL, DEACON, NIEVAR and McCANN (2005), who in fact, use the term empowerment to emphasize the importance of participatory

approaches, suggesting that "a research or evaluation method is an empowering process when it offers an opportunity for action and reflection that fosters the progressive development of participatory skills and political understandings" (p.277). In their study about the impact of participating in a community-based photovoice project (that is, a project in which participants create and jointly analyze photographs as a means of addressing social issues in their community), the authors highlight the importance of providing participants with opportunities to engage in the construction of knowledge as well as promote reflection on knowledge (see also RUSSO, 2012 and SHAH, 2015). Similarly, LATHER (1988) emphasizes the importance of both "producing emancipatory knowledge and empowering the researched" (p.570), suggesting that this process requires a shift from the traditional dynamics of self-disclosure on the part of interviewers towards creating space for *collaborative dialogue* between researchers and participants with the aim of seeking mutual understanding. In another article, LATHER (1986) re-emphasizes this need for dialogue in light of the importance of researcher-participant negotiation in the construction of meaning, arguing that the say of research participants in the interpretation of data is necessary for research to be fully dialogical and emancipatory. Thus, in her view, empowerment is not the simple by-product of research that includes a reflexive component, but necessitates the disrupting hierarchies of power more fundamentally through this sort of collaborative dialogue between researchers and their participants (see also DESPAGNE, 2013 for an example of collaborative analysis, using interpretive focus groups). [6]

HOLT (2004) reaffirms this perspective in discussing research involving children. In particular, HOLT suggests that it is important for researchers to fully understand their participants in order to represent them and their knowledge, and that doing this in turn necessitates learning and fully immersing oneself into participants' cultures and languages. Thus, she notes, the importance of thinking through how differences in researcher and participant "worlds" might shape how researchers attempt to enable empowering research relationships and in what concrete ways these spaces for empowerment are created. HOLT does not argue for the inclusion of children in the analytical process, as might be the case in more participatory approaches to research. However, her argument for the necessity of truly understanding children's cultures and languages as a prerequisite to representing them begins to shift the dynamic away from an emphasis on the knowledge produced by "researcher as expert" as worth more than that of children or other research participants whose knowledge and knowledge domains are typically held to be less valuable. [7]

HOLT's and LATHER's focus on disrupting power hierarchies is echoed in a second body of literature: scholarship about the data collection process, particularly focused on qualitative interviews, that highlights how different moments in this process bring out shifting balances of researcher-participant power. Much of this scholarship suggests that it is not so much that interviews disrupt power imbalances between researchers and participants, but rather that research participants—interviewees—negotiate power with interviewers at different points during the course of the interview (e.g., ANYAN, 2013; ENOSH &

BUCHBINDER, 2005; KVALE, 2006; THAPAR-BJÖRKERT & HENRY, 2004). ANYAN (2013) points out that the interview context is not one of interviewers and interviewees sharing equal power; rather, during different points in the data collection and analysis process, power shifts back and forth. For instance, ANYAN writes that during data collection, "ownership seems to be in the hands of the interviewee and the interviewer seems to be entirely dependent on the interviewee for his or her knowledge of the research topic" (pp.4-5); on the other hand, during the analysis stage, power is primarily in the hands of the interviewer. [8]

Existing scholarship—both that focused on shifting power hierarchies generally and negotiating power during the data collection process—sets the foundation for continued discussion about how methodological choices can open spaces for empowerment (or not). However, missing from this literature are explorations of how we might conceptualize these spaces for empowerment in different ways. For instance, little attention has been paid to how the dynamic between a researcher and interviewee/research participant might shift in ways other than in terms of how information is negotiated, or how the interview *context* as much as the interview *substance* might create opportunities for transformations in the power dynamic. [9]

In the remainder of this manuscript, therefore, I utilize examples from my own research to discuss the potential for conceptualizing these different kinds of spaces for, or moments of, empowerment in the process of empirical research. I explore empowerment in terms of how open-ended approaches to data collection can lead to *moments of vulnerability for the researcher* that challenge power dynamics within the research process, as well as how opportunities for empowerment might arise through interactions outside the substance of the interview itself. I also discuss empowerment in terms of participant engagement during the interview, particularly in terms of *what can be expressed* when open-ended approaches to data collection are utilized and the way that open-ended approaches to data collection enable the expression, or articulation, of program participants' active agency in their own transformation—in other words, how these approaches enable the *expression* of empowerment. [10]

3. Methodological Approach

The data I use to exemplify issues related to empowerment are drawn from a study undertaken to understand the long-term impact of participating in structured encounter programs between Jewish and Palestinian[1] youth in Israel, that is, programs aimed at providing opportunities for adolescents from both communities to engage in facilitated dialogue and participate together in structured activities, and in doing so, creating "small openings" (BEKERMAN &

1 The term Palestinian here is used to refer to individuals with Israeli citizenship who identify as Palestinian. These individuals are also referred to as Israeli-Arabs, Arab Israelis, Palestinian Israelis, and Palestinian citizens of Israel. My choice of terminology is based on the fact that most, although not all, Palestinian participants in my research study referred to themselves this way. I also note that my reference to Palestinians here does not include residents of the West Bank, Gaza Strip, or the Palestinian Diaspora, but focuses on those Palestinians residing within the State of Israel.

ZEMBYLAS, 2013, p.95) for countering the dominant discourses of conflict that permeate Israeli society. In the study I explored "impact" as defined by former participants who had participated in encounter activities implemented by two programs (described further below) as far back as their founding in 1982 and 1987. Thus, "impact" was conceptualized by these participants in terms of the significance they attributed to participation in these encounters and the way that they believed participation shaped (or did not shape) their subsequent life choices.[2] [11]

From the outset, I conceptualized this study as one where I hoped the methodological approaches I utilized would correspond with the goals of the organizations I was studying: goals focused on countering structural inequalities and giving voice to marginalized groups. I initially met with directors and staff members from several Jewish-Palestinian encounter organizations in the summer of 2009 to assess their interest in my work and its potential utility for their own programmatic needs. As a result of these conversations, I decided to focus my research on two organizations. Sadaka Reut, founded in 1982, focuses on educating youth for social activism, drawing upon joint Jewish-Palestinian activity as a tool for confronting injustices in Israeli society, as well as a way of modeling an alternative to Israel's current reality. Peace Child Israel, which was founded in 1987 and closed in 2011, used theater as a tool for bringing together Jewish and Palestinian youth who engaged in role-playing and other theatrical activities as a way of enabling them to learn from, and about, one another and explore inter-group similarities and differences. In both programs, participants (approximately 13-18 years old) met weekly for several hours over the course of one or more academic years. [12]

For ten months starting in the summer of 2010, and again in April-May 2012, I spent time with staff, board members, and current and former participants from Sadaka Reut and Peace Child Israel. My fieldwork included significant time observing the organizations' activities, and in the case of Sadaka Reut, engaging with the organization's staff and managers in order to help them develop tools for internal monitoring of program implementation and outcomes. I also conducted interviews with 30 former and (at the time) current staff and board members of both organizations in order to better understand the history, structure, and pedagogical approach used in Sadaka Reut and Peace Child Israel. [13]

However, the core of my research, and the aspect I focus on in this manuscript, entailed conducting life history interviews (LANGNESS & FRANK, 1981) with 73 former participants of Sadaka Reut and Peace Child Israel: that is, relatively unstructured interviews in which participants were asked to reflect broadly upon their life experiences. I utilized this approach for two primary reasons. First, life history interviews, where participants are able to reflect on the ways that specific experiences fit into broader personal and structural narratives, provide opportunities for understanding the life experiences of participants in terms of "the intertwining of 'personal' problems and external conditions" (DELLA PORTA,

2 See ROSS (2017, forthcoming) for a complete discussion of this study.

1992, p.175). This was important given that one focus of my study was how encounter participation's impact was related to the broader socio-political context in Israel. More importantly, given my methodological concern with disrupting the traditional researcher-participant power dynamic, I felt that a life history approach was best suited for enabling me to take a back seat and listen while participants told their stories. In line with this approach, interviews began with a request to "tell me about your life," and proceeded organically from there. Since interviewees knew I was interested in their encounter experiences, this was almost always a central element of the discussion; however, I tried to leave the details about *how* these experiences and their aftermath were discussed up to my participants, rather than suggesting specific areas of focus for the conversation. [14]

My interviewees were both male and female and comprised approximately equal numbers of Jews and Palestinians, but included more Sadaka Reut alumni than former participants in Peace Child Israel activities. This imbalance was due to the greater number of relationships maintained among Sadaka Reut members, which, when combined with my snowball sampling approach, led to a greater number of individuals to contact. In my initial contact with each interviewee (over the phone or via email), I briefly introduced myself,[3] explained a bit about the project, and asked if it might be possible to meet. When individuals agreed, we set a time and place to meet (ten of the interviews were conducted over Skype, due to participants no longer living in Israel or being unable to meet otherwise). [15]

Interviews were audio-recorded using a hand-held voice recorder; after each interview, I wrote extensive field notes detailing key points from the conversation and my own reflections on the interaction. I analyzed the interview data (as well as other data collected as part of this study) using hermeneutic reconstructive analysis (CARSPECKEN 2007, 2008), an approach that aims to put into explicit discourse the implicit understandings of research participants, with an emphasis on reconstructing meaning and experience. Within this framework, I read interview transcripts holistically, making notes of possible themes of focus and potential angles for interpretation. I then coded transcripts by generating new codes and sub-codes, iteratively, and then re-coding transcripts once major salient themes were clear. I relied on peer debriefing and member checks to support my interpretations, in line with accepted standards for ensuring validity in qualitative studies (LINCOLN & GUBA, 1985). [16]

4. Moments of Empowerment

In the following pages, I draw upon specific examples from my data that highlight *moments of empowerment*, as well as discussing the importance of *empowering methodologies* more broadly as an approach to knowledge production. I use these specific examples to illustrate types of moments that occurred throughout my fieldwork. Although the substantive focus of my study was the way that participation in Sadaka Reut and Peace Child Israel shaped subsequent life choices of participants, given the critical epistemological stance I brought to my

3 See RAZON and ROSS (2012) for a discussion of issues related to my introductions in relation to building rapport with participants. See CHERENI (2014) for further discussion of this issue.

research, I found myself reflecting constantly on whether and how opportunities occurred for disrupting traditional power dynamics between participants and researchers, especially in ways that enabled critique of taken-for-granted assumptions about research and the research process. [17]

One of the ways in which I believe my approach to this research enabled *moments of empowerment* for research participants was by opening up spaces to place me, the researcher, in vulnerable moments. When conducting open-ended interviews—indeed, when using a wide range of data collection techniques—we as researchers expect that our participants will open themselves up, and expose their vulnerabilities, when responding to interview questions. This kind of vulnerability often serves to reinforce the sense that research participants are less powerful than researchers who ask the questions that make participants vulnerable and often avoid this kind of vulnerability themselves. Yet, what happens when we shift the researcher-participant relationship in ways that place researchers in the same positions of vulnerability that are expected of their interviewees? In certain methodological contexts, this might not be possible: when someone anonymously responds to survey questions and never meets the researcher who designed them, or in an experimental lab setting where a participant is directed to complete specific tasks, few if any opportunities exist for researchers to engage with participants. Within the context of an interview, however, these opportunities are to some degree built in, created out of the need to create good rapport with participants and build a strong enough relationship to enable participants to share their thoughts and emotions. Building this kind of relationship requires making oneself as a researcher vulnerable as well, and in doing so, being willing to forgo some of the power that is embedded structurally in most research processes. [18]

Elsewhere (see RAZON & ROSS, 2012; ROSS, 2017, forthcoming), I have written in more detail about experiencing this vulnerability in the space of interviews in a general sense: about how humbling it is to be asked a question by a research participant forcing me to consider how I might be judged, and how my response might subsequently shape the potential for alliance building and thus for data collection. This kind of interaction was not a rarity: in fact, it happened in more than half of my interviews, most memorably with Palestinian participants who asked about my background. An example of one such moment of vulnerability occurred when one participant (a Palestinian university student) mentioned the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and expressed the belief that Jews in Israel should be aware of the futility of trying to change things from within the system, indicating an opinion that Jews should not serve in the IDF at all.[4] Following my noncommittal response to her comment, this participant asked me if I had served in the IDF. As an Israeli-American who had been a soldier in the Israeli military nearly a decade prior, I found myself feeling very uncomfortable, in no small part because I realized that what I said in response might significantly

4 By law, Jewish citizens of Israel are required to serve in the Israel Defense Forces after they graduate high school and turn 18, although in practice, numerous exemptions exist for individuals on religious, medical, and other grounds.

shape this person's openness to continuing the interview. I noted in my field notes later that day,

> "I asked [participant] about military service and her views on friends being pressured, socially, into going. When we got into this topic she asked me if I served in the military, which led to a discussion about my own service, what I hoped to do with it, the fact that today I wouldn't enlist, etc. I felt a bit naked opening myself up like that to her but then I felt like it was only the right thing to do considering that essentially that is what I am requesting every time I do an interview. It was tough because I was pretty sure she would not approve [her facial expression when I said that today I wouldn't enlist was one that suggested she was much happier with that response], but at the same time I felt that it was also really a good thing to do." [19]

I also noted in my field notes that following the interview, when we were engaged in "informal" conversation, this participant asked me several further questions about my background and participation in social change endeavors, which had been the focus of the discussion about *her* experiences. I wrote that these questions similarly placed me in a position of feeling uncomfortable, more because of a general sense of vulnerability rather than discomfort with specific questions. [20]

I experienced a similar sense of vulnerability during another interview, also with a Palestinian, after my participant finished up a soliloquy in which he had expressed his ire at Jews moving into Yaffo (his city of residence), and asked me if I myself lived in the city. As it happened, I did not live directly in Yaffo, but on its outskirts, and had been telling many of my participants that I lived "on the border with Yaffo," out of solidarity with the Palestinian community there. In the moment of his question, I found myself unsure of what the "right" response to his question might be in his eyes, and reflected later how uncomfortable I had been in that moment, uncertain about how I should respond. [21]

It is impossible to know whether in either of these two cases, or other interactions with interviewees during which I experienced such vulnerability, my participants felt empowered. However, I believe these moments of vulnerability on my part point to a *possibility* for creating moments of empowerment for participants—specifically, moments that exist when spaces for equal dialogue between researcher and participant are built into the research process. Further, I argue that it matters *when* a researcher opens her/himself up to experiencing that vulnerability as much as *whether* she/he opens him/herself up to these vulnerabilities in the first place. Creating space for being questioned and challenged in the midst of an interview, for instance, is quite different from allowing participants to ask questions of the researcher once an interview is complete. From the perspective of empowering research participants, participants wield much more power *during* an interview rather than *after* it (see ANYAN, 2013); thus, moments of vulnerability in the midst of a conversation matter much more with respect to how they might shape subsequent communication from participants and therefore the data utilized to make inferences. [22]

The examples I have raised so far address possibilities for research to create moments of empowerment where a specific kind of researcher-participant interaction challenges dominant power hierarchies in the research process. I also suggest that choices researchers make about their methodological approaches in a more general sense can create opportunities for participant empowerment. For instance, using life history and other open-ended, unstructured interview approaches provide opportunities that empower participants by enabling them to focus on what is important to them, rather than to researchers. The unstructured nature of these approaches to data collection create opportunities for voicing concerns that may differ from, or even contradict, issues that are generally part of dominant discourse. Indeed, this is an issue that has been discussed at length in the context of feminist research (TSIKATAH & DARKWAH, 2014): as ANDERSON and JACK (1991) write, "An oral interview, when structured by the narrator instead of the researcher, allows each woman to express her uniqueness in its full class, racial, and ethnic richness" (p.20). Open-ended interview approaches thus stand in marked contrast with closed-ended survey questions or even semi-structured interviews, where the domains of focus are determined *a priori* by the researcher, without input from the individuals at the focus of research. Instead, they provide participants with the power to act (or speak, as the case may be) according to their own frames of reference: what SPENCER (2014) refers to as *dispositional empowerment*. In doing so, these approaches place the focus of knowledge production in the hands of research participants rather than researchers, allowing for non-dominant perspectives to emerge. [23]

Within the interviews I conducted, these non-dominant perspectives manifested organically in critiques of the encounter programs at the focus of my research. For instance, Anna[5], an immigrant from the former Soviet Union who is neither Jewish nor Palestinian, expressed a subtle but clear critique of Sadaka Reut. Importantly, Anna stated this critique not while we spoke specifically about her Sadaka Reut experiences, but rather during our discussion of what Israeli society should, or could, look like:

> Anna: "I really, I truly try to be as neutral as possible. Of course, I can't be, of course not. I also, I also ask myself all the time if what influenced me is neutral or not. Sadaka Reut is not neutral. Sadaka Reut tries to be the opposite of society. That's also not neutral. Like, Sadaka Reut tries to balance out what happens on the street, and if the street is super on the side of the Jews, Sadaka Reut is super on Palestinian side. And I'm not sure it needs to be like that."
>
> Karen: "That far to the other side?"
>
> Anna: "Yes. I'm not talking about Sadaka Reut or how Sadaka Reut should be. I'm talking about reality, that a reality needs to be created here, I'm not sure that the reality needs to be the same as what happens in Sadaka Reut ... reality shouldn't need to look the way that Sadaka Reut looks, in my opinion." [24]

In many ways Anna's statement seems relatively mild as a critique of Sadaka Reut. However, it is important to note that, fundamentally, the organization's work

5 All names utilized in this manuscript are pseudonyms.

focuses on helping young people develop into activists—and more than six years of research with Sadaka Reut suggest that ideally, this activism will manifest in ways that show ideological similarities to the organization's own approach. Anna's belief that perhaps Israeli society should not look like what Sadaka Reut espouses thus reflects a pointed, though subtle, critique of these ideological premises. It is this subtlety that I wish to emphasize as illustrative of the potential of open-ended interviewing methods to allow alternative perspectives to be heard, and thus to empower the participants articulating these views. Another element of my conversation with Anna, later in the interview, further illustrates this point:

> Anna: "I don't feel that I succeeded in answering for myself certain questions or knowing how to act in the purest way. That is, I now know what to say, under every circumstance, I know exactly which buttons to push, I know exactly what, what the other side feels, but I don't … I don't feel that at every moment I said exactly what I thought, because I knew that it wasn't right."
>
> Karen: "To say what you really think?"
>
> Anna: "Yes. Because I knew that it's not politically the right thing to say. It wasn't the right thing simply because of the fact that it would cause the person sitting in front of me to feel very badly. And then he wouldn't say what he thought or he would say what he really thought and it would cause an explosion. I mean … it seems to me that, like, the brainwashing that we undergo is so strong…it's not just in Jewish Israeli society but also in Palestinian, it influences our awareness. But I feel like there's always something there and I can't be entirely neutral. Or, if I do succeed in being neutral I don't know if I should be neutral…I don't know if there are things that I need to think, you know, because the Palestinians are oppressed and…like, they are constantly attacked and their identity erased and so on and so on, so do I have to be entirely on their side, or can I keep some of, you know, my opinions, the ones that are *really* my opinion … I know that I didn't entirely erase within me all of what television shows, all of what my teachers thrust into my mind. But I really try to erase those ideas that society forced on me."
>
> Karen: "Can you tell me why it's important for you to erase those ideas?"
>
> Anna: "Because…because I want to create an opinion of my own. I tried to erase it so that, you know, I could start from zero and then really see what is happening." [25]

Again, the critique of Sadaka Reut expressed here is subtle, and indeed, Anna's comment about the expansion of her knowledge and awareness highlight what she explicitly addressed in other parts of our discussion as positive aspects of her experiences in the organization. I include the lengthy quote because the exchange between the two of us points to the importance of open conversation for enabling a deeper reflection on the part of participants in that particular moment of the interview. Here, Anna's somewhat hesitant language (e.g., her use of terms like "maybe," "I don't know," and the pauses in her response) illustrates a sort of reflection-in-the-moment leading to the conclusion that while the environment in Sadaka Reut is not problematic *per se*, she disagrees with how the organization attempts to deal with the injustices prevalent in Israeli society. [26]

The subtle, yet critical perspectives highlighted here in quotes from Anna's interview were reflected in the majority of the 70 life history interviews I conducted. Adi, a Jewish participant in Peace Child Israel, spoke at length about the program's positive influence, but also expressed her belief that the highly-structured nature of the program was problematic. And Gabrielle, who was both an alumna of Peace Child Israel and had spent years working in a number of similar encounter programs, told me that despite her work, she was skeptical about the actual potential of such programs to effect change. As she put it, "[t]here are all of those grassroots theories, about work at the grassroots level. They're very nice, but I wouldn't say that they are good. I mean, I would dearly love to believe in them, but I can't … ." [27]

In none of these examples were participants responding to questions I had posed about the programs and/or their strengths and weaknesses. Rather, they emerged organically as part of conversations about broader issues related to social and political change. As a whole, therefore, these examples highlight the way that life history and other unstructured interview approaches create a space for hearing perspectives that are important to the research participant, not just the researcher, and can thus serve a potentially empowering function. [28]

5. Discussion

As the examples above illustrate, spaces that exist for dialogic data collection, as enabled through open-ended, unstructured interviews, create opportunities for empowerment to occur in a number of different ways. However, even within these spaces, several questions remain about empowerment and the potential for empowering research. [29]

One such question addresses different degrees of empowerment or empowerment potential. In terms of the study from which the examples in this manuscript are drawn, my research was characterized by use of a data collection technique that, relative to many others, holds potential for enabling moments of empowerment to occur. At another level, however, the study lacked fully dialogic or participatory processes in the mapping out of the research design. I did draw upon the knowledge and input of staff from both organizations in framing my research, and likewise worked with staff while in the field, using their expertise to help shape and change my approach as challenges arose. However, it is important to note that input into design, and likewise action on my part to directly engage in capacity building, did not extend beyond organization staff to participants in Sadaka Reut or Peace Child Israel initiatives. Effectively, therefore, I set limits on the degree to which my research might create spaces for empowering participants, even as I strove to create a study where the voices and perspectives of my interviewees could be heard and where a space might be created in the interview itself for challenging researcher-participant power imbalances. [30]

This tension between wanting to create space for voices to emerge, and fully incorporating participants into all aspects of the research process, has important

implications for thinking about the potential empowering nature of data collection in relation to the broader process of research projects as a whole. Even as scholarship has highlighted the importance of creating multiple moments, including moments all along the research process, during which empowerment can occur (GAVENTA, CREED & MORRISSEY, 1998), the possibility that research can be empowering for research participants remains unclear when all power about the timing of these potentially empowering moments (such as when participants can ask questions), as well as decisions about research outcomes, rest in the hands of the researcher. While data collection processes in life history and open interviewing approaches may provide participants with an opportunity to voice their concerns and if the occasion arises, to push the researcher to be vulnerable in a way that challenges power imbalances, these opportunities are limited to the space of a given interview. Moreover, this opportunity still takes for granted the existence of a space within which traditional power dynamics between researchers and their participants *can* be disrupted. In other words, like most of the literature on this topic, the starting point is a discussion of power dynamics within interview studies, which means that the focus already is placed specifically on a methodological approach that by its nature might create opportunities for the empowerment of participants vis-a-vis researchers. However, discussions about the potential for empowering participants should be situated within the broader context of research methodology—that is, within the framework of the entire research design. [31]

Problematic as well is the fact that except in truly collaborative research, after an interview is complete, it is the researcher who makes decisions about what is included in the final narrative or write-up. This is true even when, as in the case of my research, extensive member checks are conducted with all individual research participants or when participants challenge the researcher's interpretations (e.g., BORLAND, 1991). In other words, both the *opportunities* for challenging the researcher's interpretations and the *time frame* during which this can occur are still determined by the researcher rather than the research participant. Even the space to reflect on an interview and the way that interview has challenged researcher-participant power imbalances is itself a space that exists almost entirely for the researcher alone. Of course, it is possible that a research participant might reflect on an interview as well, but few opportunities exist for participants to disseminate these reflections to others, and as DENNIS (2014) points out, even to the extent that opportunities for participant reflections on research exist, they occur—again—only when participants are formally invited to reflect in this way by a researcher. [32]

Ultimately, these constraints suggest significant limits to what might be considered empowering within the research context. Thus, I suggest it is worth thinking whether there are creative ways, short of turning to fully collaborative projects, that moments of empowerment might be extended, and greater power provided to our research participants over making decisions about their own stories. For instance, we might think about different moments within the research process where spaces for challenging traditional power dynamics exist, rather than focusing solely on the actual interview. This can include consideration of

choices about where and when interviews take place, and who makes these choices. It may seem flippant to suggest that the ability of interviewees to set a time and place for interviews is empowering. Yet in certain contexts, I think this point should not be minimized. In my research, decisions about timing and location were always made by participants. And on one particular occasion where I had traveled to a rural Palestinian village, I recall my interviewee lamenting the fact that in all his years as a board member of one of the organizations I studied, never once had his Jewish colleagues come to visit him in his home. What did it mean for him, then, that I (a Jewish-Israeli-American) took the bus to his rural village in northern Israel? In the absence of explicit reflection with this participant, it is impossible to know the degree to which his choosing the location of our conversation was experienced as empowering. However, our interactions that day, reinforced by my experiences throughout my interactions with interviewees, suggest that this structural and logistical element of the research process—the choice of where and when to engage in data collection—might be considered another opportunity for creating empowering moments. [33]

We might also consider ways of shifting the degree of control that we as researchers hold over data collection approaches. While life history interviews provide opportunities for dialogic interactions, their use in this study still reflects a decision I as researcher made about the form within which stories could be told. More empowering, in terms of providing participants with control over the knowledge production process, might be an approach wherein, even within the framework of a study where a researcher decides upon the overarching questions and design, participants might have the opportunity to decide upon the structure within which they feel they can best express their perspective on a given topic. Rather than a standard, sit down interview, for instance, they might feel better able to draw (and then talk about) a picture, or engaging in a walking interview (e.g., BUTLER & DERRETT, 2014). [34]

Finally, while we occasionally speak about critical consciousness-raising among participants as a goal of research, less has been said about the way the research experience, and especially the researcher-participant interaction, might shift the researcher's thinking—not only about his or her data, but more broadly than as related directly to the research process. In a sense, this influence of participants on researchers with whom they engage might be considered empowerment, although in this case it is also necessary for researchers to create structures within which they explicitly acknowledge these shifts to participants, even—indeed, especially—when this acknowledgment can engender a sense of researcher discomfort. [35]

Ultimately, for us to move towards a truly empowerment framework for research requires re-positioning what is "empowering" not as researcher-initiated, but as a collective process that is defined jointly by researchers and participants—as is the case in participatory action research (see, e.g., BILLIES, FRANCISCO, KRUEGER & LINVILLE, 2010). Yet as CALL-CUMMINGS and HOOK (2015) point out through their distinction between empowerment at individual and societal levels, not all empowerment is the same. Given the realities within which

most research occurs and the structural constraints that make fully participatory research challenging to pursue in the best of circumstances, finding moments of empowerment is far more likely than creating fully empowering processes. Thus, a starting point for moving us towards a broader methodology of empowerment entails thinking creatively about how moments of empowerment can be expanded, especially in ways that do not place control of what is "empowering" in the hands of researchers, but rather acknowledge the power already embodied in participants' everyday lives and enable them to define the ways through which it can and should expand. [36]

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